

Checkered mittens - The Medieval Wool Industry

Sheep have long been at the centre of life in Cumbria, and never more so than in the monastic period of Medieval England. The Domesday Survey records that there were more sheep in England in 1281 than all other forms of livestock put together. And the wool was valuable. Between the years 1189 and 1199, monasteries contributed no less than 50,000 sacks of wool to the ransom of Richard I.

At a lecture last Autumn, Harry Hawkins held the attention of a large audience of Appleby Archeological Group members on the subject of "Monks, Shepherds, Sheep and Wool". He started by explaining that sheep were probably introduced to Britain by early prehistoric settlers from the Middle East. These sheep would not have been the large, white-fleeced beasts we are familiar with today, but rather, small brown animals similar to a modern Soay sheep. These were probably more important for their milk and meat than their wool at first with the wool being "pulled" rather than shorn.

However, by the time Vikings were making their presence felt, wool production was happening on an industrial scale. Quite surprisingly, the sails on Viking long ships were made from wool with a large warship requiring 1.5 tonnes or more. Clearly a considerable number of sheep and daunting amount of labour would have been needed to service the Viking fleet.

But it was with the arrival of the Normans and the establishment of the Monasteries that sheep-farming finally began to evolve into the industry we see today. Breeding sheep commercially for wool had grown enormously by 1200. The largest producers were the monasteries. The Cistercians (White Monks) were the pioneers closely followed by the Premonstratensians (White Canons) and the English Gilbertines. By 1297 some 50% of the nation's wealth was derived from wool. It certainly formed nearly all of the country's export earnings

However Harry went on to explain that breeding sheep and harvesting of their wool was only part of the larger industry. The associated trades of cloth manufacture and the dealerships that linked producers with purchasers was just as important. Until the middle of the 14th century, the wool trade was handled by Flemish merchants from the cities of Bruges, Ghent and Ypres using sophisticated financial techniques. The monasteries were quick to see the advantages offered by borrowing money against the value of future crops and dealers were equally quick to supply such services. Typical of these dealers was William Goldington who was based in Appleby in the late 13th Century. He would advance cash at a premium - and take possession of stock at a discount should circumstances lead to default. It was not uncommon for whole monasteries to go bankrupt in times of poor harvest or disease.

Books were written about the management of flocks. In a book "Le Bon Berger" written by Jean le Brie in 1379, shepherds were advised that "First of all, the lambs, young and tender should be treated kindly and without violence" and that "The shepherd should be of good morals, should avoid the tavern, bawdy houses and all dishonest places..." and "In the winter the shepherd should have mittens to keep his hands from the cold. He shouldn't buy these mittens but should skilfully make them. When they are checkered they are even prettier". And much more in the same vein!

Relics of these industries are still to be seen everywhere in the landscape today. The wool industry may not be what it once was but sheep continue to be the dominant livestock animal in Cumbria, giving the county much of its character.

Harry was warmly thanked for his lecture

Martin Joyce